



The Mystery of Evil

JERRY ROBBINS

*Lutheran Campus Center
Morgantown, West Virginia*

MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE THE PROBLEM OF EVIL CHALLENGES THE FAITH OF believers that God is real and cares about the world. As Hans Küng has said, suffering or evil is “the acid test” for every religion.¹

In his book *Belief and Non-Belief*, Michael Novak provides a glimpse of this religious struggle. He tells about receiving the news of his brother’s brutal and senseless death in Pakistan at the hands of some rampaging thugs. A priest, 28 years old, with a promising career in Christian-Muslim dialogue, his brother had been stabbed several times and his body either eaten by pariah dogs or irretrievably buried. This occurred six weeks after the assassination of John F. Kennedy, and the cumulative effect of these shocking tragedies cast Novak into a deep dark depression. He writes, “When one’s faith has been beaten and winnowed,” then the project of belief is “cruel.” “There is no comfort in the heart, no oil upon the forehead, or ointment on one’s wounds. There is no vision of a heaven nor any haven of hope.”

More to the point of faith and doubt, Novak writes, the believer “must go into a great night of his senses, imagination, and intelligence, and cling with naked adherence to a God he cannot clearly apprehend.” More radically, still, “Inevitably

¹Hans Küng, *Christianity and Chinese Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 1989) 174.

JERRY ROBBINS is Lutheran campus pastor at West Virginia University.

The biblical and Christian response to the problem of evil is finally not rational explanation but faith—faith in a God who is sensitive and strong for the alleviation of human suffering.

one stands before God, and God is silent. He does not show himself to any man in his lifetime, at least not in a way that can influence the decision of one who does not believe.”²

Novak is a Christian. He writes as a believer. His comments are not those of a skeptic or atheist outside religion. As a *believer*, Novak says God is hidden, inconsequential. God is nowhere to be found in the world, God makes no real difference. In effect, God no longer exists in any meaningful sense. What is the reason for Novak’s despair? Clearly, it is the problem of abhorrent suffering, senseless tragedy and pain that causes Novak’s loss of faith in God.

It appears that this is the issue behind much modern disbelief, one of the major reasons people give up on religion. In this short reflection, I want to suggest that the way out of this disbelief is not to engage the issue on a rational level but a religious level. Let us look at each of these approaches in turn.

I.

In the face of the horrible reality of evil, some people argue it is better not to believe. Belief only adds more grief to life because then you have to explain what God is doing in this serio-tragedy called life. Only believers worry about that. Only God contributes that problem. This is one issue for which we can blame none other than God. So, why not just give up belief in God? That’s how to measure relief—just get rid of the irritant.

Atheism certainly is one response to the problem of evil, and many choose it. But atheism is not much of an answer. For instance, in spite of its appeal to Novak, he writes, atheism is just another emptiness, another “polar night.”³ Indeed, atheism is a non-solution because it eliminates the very God that might provide some consolation in the long run. Atheism is theological overkill. It goes too far, excising not only doubt, but the life in which doubt resides. Like the biblical story in which a man sweeps out the evil spirits in his house, but invites in more spirits more evil than before, the last state of the disbeliever becomes worse than the first.

Another strategy is to *modify God’s power*. Maybe it is the case that God just doesn’t have the power to make this a better world—in which case, God is not to blame. Harold Kushner takes this approach in *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.⁴

While this approach may be sympathetic to suffering, it cannot support faith. A God of limited power who intends to do well but just can’t bring it off, who wants to reward the righteous but hasn’t the resources, who would lighten suffering but just can’t manage it, this ineffectual God is a second-rate deity, not very interesting, and certainly not worthy of worship. It is the God Woody Allen lambasts when he complains that God is an “underachiever.”

²Michael Novak, *Belief and Unbelief: A Philosophy of Self-Knowledge* (New York: Macmillan, 1965) 10–11, 21, 23.

³*Ibid.*, 19.

⁴Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Avon, 1981).

Others suggest that the reason there may be suffering in the world is that *God's idea of what is good may be different from our idea of goodness*. We think it is good if we don't suffer. But perhaps our happiness is not God's foremost interest. We think life, health, and happiness are good things. Yet God called Abraham to kill Isaac, no questions asked. We think promoting human welfare is the right thing to do, but Augustine and Aquinas said God declares what is right. Remember poor Job, chastened by God's judgment.

Again, this is hardly an adequate answer, no matter how noble the purpose of God. How can we worship or follow a God that kills little children or disregards the prayers of the anguished? If human beings would hasten to the rescue of the hurt and helpless, shouldn't God? If God has the power to help, but not the goodness, then that is the worst possible world. As well, if God is not on the side of good, then such a God is not God in the first place.

Another strategy to explain suffering in the world is to argue that *it is really not so bad as it looks*. People suffer, yes, but consider all the good that comes out of it—things like courage, love, and faith. Families are brought together, people are inspired to donate money, even body organs. Great songs are written and inspiring movies produced. It is not all bad, and the good that comes out of it balances or even outweighs the bad. The great popularizer of religion, C. S. Lewis, took this way out of the problem.⁵

Unfortunately, it is a route that gets us more lost than the problem itself. Try telling a person with a terminal illness that it is all for some good. Try comforting a parent of a child mercilessly cut down by a crazed malcontent with the observation that it will benefit the community in the long run. There are no more hollow words for the afflicted than, "It was for some good." That is simply a kind of word game turning bad into good, a kind of mental trickery turning pain into blessing. It squeezes all the poison out of evil and suggests we settle down beside it rather than try to eliminate it. Indeed, wouldn't it be wrong to reduce pain if it does so many good things? So the effort to make evil an illusion is an illusion itself, as insidious and destructive as the suffering that prompted it.

What are we to say to all these so-called arguments? In his play, *The Black Girl in Search of God*, George Bernard Shaw has the girl say to God, "I do not want to argue. I want to know why, if you really made the world, you made it so badly." God replies with a reminder that God is God and she has no right to criticize God. God challenges the girl to make a better world, reminding her that she can't do it, and, anyway, she will be dead in fifty years, while God endures forever. Finally God says, "You think don't you that you are better than God? What have you to say to that argument?" "It isn't an argument, it's a sneer," the black girl says, "You don't seem to know what an argument is."⁶

⁵C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: Macmillan, 1931).

⁶George Bernard Shaw, *The Black Girl in Search of God*, quoted in Elizabeth Maclaren, *The Nature of Belief* (New York: Hawthorn, 1976) 6.

Most of the alleged solutions to the problem of evil are rational sneers—they ignore or trivialize real facts or faith. They do not recognize real evil or the fulness of belief in the face of human suffering. Perhaps the reason for the mistake is that we treat human suffering as though it were a mere problem or puzzle, when, in fact, it is a mystery. The difference, of course, is that problems and puzzles yield answers and solutions. A problem in calculus or accounting has an answer you can reach if you have the knowledge and persevere long enough. A crossword puzzle, Rubick's cube, or a picture puzzle can be solved with enough skill and diligence. But a mystery is not like any of those things. You can study the great mysteries of life—birth, love, genius, death, God—and know little more when you are finished than when you began. In fact, you will probably be more uncertain after studying them than before. The more we examine the big questions, the more we realize how little we know. It is like that with the problem of human suffering. The more we examine it, the more perplexed we become. It does not yield to our probes, our debates, our theodicies. Indeed, we are cast into an “abyss where human thought drowns,”⁷ where we must only cling with all our strength to the mystery itself, wringing whatever meaning we can from it.

II.

So we come to a second strategy for handling the problem of evil, that of holding onto the mystery itself. The name of that anchor is faith, and the name of the mystery is the God we see revealed in the life of Israel and especially in Jesus. How we manage this precarious position is the theme of the second part of this essay. Let us begin with a story.

It is said that in medieval France a group of very wise men was sitting around one day discussing how many teeth there are in a horse's mouth. The speculations and theories grew ever more abstract and fanciful, threatening to engulf the philosophers and theologians in an avalanche of words and concepts. Just then the town jester arrived, listened to the arcane discussion a few moments, then burst in with this comment, “Gentlemen, you want to know how many teeth are in a horse's mouth? Well, I have the solution to your problem. Just go out and count them!”

Discussions of the problem of human suffering can become very academic and esoteric, carrying us farther and farther away from reality. Somehow we must break out of that circle of talk and turn to the real world. We must look and listen for an answer as this comes to us from our religious history and tradition. George Buttrick has said that no formula or reasoning can answer the issue of evil. Inasmuch as it is an event in our lives, we need an equal and opposite event to deal with it. Christians find that event in the Bible.⁸ Believers go to that story for some light on the dark shadows suffering casts over our minds.

⁷Austin Farrer, *Love Almighty and Ills Unlimited* (New York: Doubleday, 1961) 59.

⁸George Buttrick, *God, Pain, and Evil* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966) 92, 105-108, 153-155.

The first thing we notice when we turn to God's revelation in the Bible is that there are *few efforts to explain* or rationalize human suffering. In the Old Testament, Job says to God, "Let me know why you contend against me" (Job 10:2), and, in more general terms, "Why are times not kept by the Almighty, and why do those who know him never see his days?" (24:1). Job wants to know why the good suffer and the evil prosper, a question that must have circulated throughout Jewish history up to the time of Jesus. Encountering a blind man, the disciples asked Jesus, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" (John 9:2). Interestingly, Jesus dismissed the suggestion that the man's suffering was due to his sin or his parents' sin. Paul seems to lapse into an effort to justify suffering when he lists its good effects—endurance, character, and hope (Rom 5:4), a maneuver similar to that of James, when he writes, "My brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of any kind, consider it nothing but joy, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance" (James 1:2-3).

A somewhat frequent explanation for suffering is *the devil* or Satan. Interestingly, the Bible does not pause over the problem of why there is a devil. Some passages suggest that the devil is a fallen angel, cast down because of his pride and rebellion (Isa 14:12-14; Ezek 28:12-17; Rev 12:7-9; Luke 10:18). Nor is the earliest picture of the devil much help in explaining why there is evil, inasmuch as the most primitive devil is God's colleague who assists the divine will (Zech 3:1; Job 1:12). However, in later Israelite history a truly nasty devil appears, a cosmic force opposed to and by God (Ps 74:14). This adversary is loosely identified as a dragon or serpent-like creature variously named the "serpent" (Gen 3:4-5), "Leviathan" (Isa 27:1), and "Rahab" (Isa 51:9).

The evil workings of the Old Testament devil become clear in the New Testament, which is filled with spirits and demons that are up to no good. The devil is a tempter (Matt 4:3), a liar (John 8:44), an enemy of the word (Luke 8:12), a corrupter (1 John 3:8-10; Acts 5:3), and a destroyer (Mark 1:23-26; 1 Pet 5:8). His ways lead only to death (Heb 2:14). The devil or Beelzebul is the "prince of demons" whose works are altogether opposed to Jesus (Matt 12:22-27). Jesus acknowledges his existence (Matt 13:24-30), resists his ways (Matt 4:1-11), and spends a great deal of his time casting him out (Mark 3:10-15), and destroying his works (1 John 3:8). The early church wrestled with the "Evil One," an altogether malevolent force that was like a "thorn in the flesh" (2 Cor 12:7) and a blinding darkness over the minds of believers (2 Cor 4:4). The devil causes people to lie to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3) and devours them like a "roaring lion" (1 Pet 5:8). Unlike rational attempts to trivialize evil, the biblical Satan is a real power to be reckoned with.

Less fearsome, but even more pronounced among the reasons for suffering according to the Bible, is *the judgment of God* upon human sin. The God of the Old Testament is not like a kindly grandmother who wishes only that all will have a good time. Rather, the biblical God is righteous, establishing a covenant with the people, and demanding obedience from them. When the covenant is broken,

God's wrath brings punishment. In the Bible, much human suffering is the result of a refusal to live within the law of God.

For example, Adam and Eve are cast out of the garden into a world of work and pain because of their refusal to obey God (Gen 3:16-19). Because of their wickedness, generations of people are swept from the face of the earth by colossal flood waters (Gen 6:5-7). Terrible drought, famine, and death result when God's commandments are disobeyed (Deut 11:15-17). Because it is unfaithful to God, the Israelite nation is overrun by foreign invaders (Amos 3:1; Isa 40:2; Hos 10:10). The prophets attribute the social ills of their time to sin, and call the people to repentance (Amos 5:24). According to the psalmist, it is sin that makes the body sick (Ps 32:3). Jesus warned about the wrath of God against the wicked (Luke 13:1-5; Matt 13:24-43; 22:1-14; 25:31-46). The early church traced many of the problems of society to the rebellious and faithless will (James 4:1-10), and warned that a life of eternal suffering lies in wait for those who sin (2 Thess 1:9). Indeed, the consequences of sin are so dire that it is better to suffer the pain of removing their source (hand, eye) than the eternal fire of hell (Matt 5:29-30).

In spite of these hard sayings, it should not be overlooked that the scheme of God's justice is always contained within God's love. God punishes Israel for her iniquities because God loves her like one of her own (Amos 3:2). "[God] disciplines us for our good" (Heb 12:10). It is the fault of the people, and not because of any divine displeasure, that suffering comes (Ezek 18:32). God's wrath is never capricious or sinister but always contained within God's compassion (Lam 3:22-23, 31-33; Rev 3:9). Whether we cringe in fear before this active God of the Bible, or sigh in relief, it is clear that this God has nothing in common with the ineffective or wishy-washy God of rational argument.

The most prominent message of the Bible on the problem of human suffering, however, is that *God's will is for the alleviation of suffering*, and his power is with those who struggle for the *overcoming of evil*. There is nothing here about a pact with evil on the grounds that it is not all that bad. In the Old Testament, God is a warrior against evil, opposing the dark chaos at creation (Gen 1:2), and sustaining the world against the hostile forces of destruction (Isa 45:15). God is like a shepherd of the people (Psalm 23), protecting the innocent and poor (Ezek 34:11-16) and moving in to save the oppressed (Jer 23:5-6). Similarly, the prophets call the nation to action against pain: "cease to do evil, learn to do good"; in more detail, "seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isa 1:16-17). Leaving all theoretical discussion behind, Amos counsels, "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24).

Jesus continues the work of the Father (John 5:1-17) in reducing human suffering. George Buttrick writes, "He [Jesus] never hinted that pain is good in itself: he healed the sick in body and mind, deeming pain a handicap or curse from which men should be delivered."⁹ At his temptation, Jesus turned back the prince of dark-

⁹Ibid., 35.

ness (Matt 4:1-11); later he taught his disciples to pray to be delivered from evil (Matt 6:1-13). Jesus did not spend much time in speculating about evil, but moved swiftly for its defeat (John 9:6ff.). He did not allow his disciples to get sidetracked into idle discussion, but called them to responsible action (Luke 17:1-2). They, in turn, pointed to God's action for the answer (1 Cor 10:13).

Most significantly, Jesus devoted much of his life to reducing human suffering. Once while teaching in the synagogue, he abruptly stopped his discourse in order to heal a sick woman (Luke 13:10-13). Multitudes were brought to him for cures of all kinds (Mark 3:7-10). He placed the healing of human illness above all other considerations. The sabbath laws could not stop him (Mark 3:1-6). The ridicule of the skeptics could not deter him (Mark 5:40). The most fearful forces of evil could not discourage him (Mark 5:1-20). And Satan could not defeat him (Matt 4:1-11). Even the lack of faith among people did not slow him down (Luke 17:11-19). The will and intent of Jesus was to heal first and talk later, if at all. Jesus did not argue, speculate, or reason about the causes of affliction. He simply went out and got the job done. On this point, Stephen Wold is absolutely correct, "The ministry of Jesus was devoted to alleviating suffering and bringing joy to the hearts of those who were in pain."¹⁰

The premier exhibit in Jesus' war against suffering is his resurrection from the dead. Death, the last enemy, was destroyed by Jesus in his ministry, as he raised Lazarus and others from the grave (Luke 7:11-17; Mark 5:21-42). His own death on the cross was put to death by the power of God at work within him. Christ was victorious over the worst of the evils that cause human suffering (1 Cor 15:24-26). By his resurrection, Jesus was raised to the right hand of God, "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion" (Eph 1:20-21). This victory is the doorway to heaven for the believer whose suffering will give place to glory (Rom 8:18), a glory that will make all previous suffering fade in significance (John 16:20-22). This is the "consolation of the cross" for all believers: not a "neat rational explanation," but the news that "God raised Jesus Christ from the dead."¹¹

Just as in the Old Testament, God's action in Jesus overcoming suffering calls for a similar action from God's people. As God comforts us, so we are to comfort others (2 Cor 1:3-7). In fact, if God's comfort is to have any real effect, it will be up to us to make it happen. So Jesus challenges his disciples to care for the poor, the sick, the blind, and the lame (Matt 25:37-43). So the early church counseled, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom 12:21). So John Roth suggests to the church today, "All good worship ends by sending people forth to relieve suffering, to create joy, and to make friends out of enemies."¹² So the church at worship leads us to pray, "Let our words and actions be

¹⁰Stephen A. Wold, *Is God Still Here? The Comfort of the Cross for Those Who Suffer* (Philadelphia: Augsburg, 1989) 54.

¹¹Buttrick, *God, Pain, and Evil*, 153.

¹²John Roth, "A Theology of Protest," in *Encountering Evil: Live Options in Theology*, ed. Stephen T. Davis (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981) 36.

a clear sign of your desire to restore and renew our brothers and sisters who carry heavy burdens.”

One of the most remarkable themes in the Bible that receives little attention, but confirms our point, is the notion that those who love God and others will contend with God about the way things are going in the world.¹³ We see this in Abraham who interceded on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen 28:23-25), Job who argued with God for fair treatment (Job 9:22-24), the author of Lamentations who asked why God had forsaken him (Lam 5:20), the psalm writer who grieved over the poor state of justice in the world (Pss 23:1; 82:2), and Jesus in his prayer from the cross (Matt 27:46). How could all this talking back to God be allowed except it presume that God cares and is able to do something about suffering in the world? It would be pointless without the expectation that God can make a real difference with real suffering. But we have seen that that is just the picture we get in the Bible—a God sensitive and strong for the alleviation of human suffering.

Frederick Sontag, who often makes provocative statements, has suggested that God can't be very religious because God needs time to care for the world. God can't afford the luxury of ritual and devotion, because God must remain constantly aware of the world, its men, women, children, and other living things.¹⁴ To be sure, we can spiritualize God right out of this world. We can spend a lot of time thinking of God as “religious” and elevating the notion of God to some sort of theoretical throne. But that is really not the God of the Bible. The biblical God is not “religious,” if we mean by that a deity that is abstract, otherworldly, removed from this world to dwell in statues, cathedrals, or theological systems. No, the biblical God is very much busy with the care of the world. And one department that takes a great amount of time is the suffering-humanity department. In that department God has rolled up God's sleeves, plunged in with both feet, turned God's face to the sick and sorrowing, and set to work liberating the captives. That is the meaning of the cross, and that is God's comforting word over the problem of evil. ☩

¹³Jon D. Levenson, *Creation and the Persistence of Evil: The Jewish Drama of Divine Omnipotence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1988) 149-150.

¹⁴Frederick Sontag, *What Can God Do?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979) 114.